Demystification Of Cultural Psychology In Taufiq Rafat’s Poem “Wedding In The Flood” From Barthesian Model Of Five Codes: A Structuralistic Critique

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Abstract

The present study encompasses the scrutiny of Taufiq Rafat’s poem “Wedding in the Flood” from his anthology Arrival of the Monsoon: Collected Poems (1947-1978) using the theoretical lens of Roland Barthes’ five codes – hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, symbolic and cultural – of interpretation. The step-by-step method of textual analysis proposed by Barthes in his book S/Z is applied to this poem to resolve its hidden mysteries through these codes. The hermeneutic code floods the reader’s mind with questions regarding the genre, title, theme, writer’s take on the topic, and the storyline involved in the poem. The proairetic code engages the action and reaction series employing the five elements of plot, exposition, complication, conflict, falling action, and resolution, to arise suspense, enigmas, and prediction of the probable outcome on the part of the reader providing answers to the basic queries. The cultural code explains cultural jokes, proverbs, conventions, psychologies, and traditions found in the narrative. The semantic code suggests the major theme of the poem as the happy post-marital survival of the bride while the symbolic code discloses other themes, on a wider scale, stemming through literary elements of binary opposition including the theme of dowry, professional selfishness, and expectation versus reality. This paper aims to demystify the hidden mysteries underlying the poem and make it comprehensible for a general reader.
Keywords: Hermeneutic Code, Proairetic Code, Semantic Code, Symbolic Code, Cultural Code

1. Introduction

The genre of dramatic monologue, rooted in Alfred Tennyson’s Locksley Hall Sixty Years After (1886), was perfected by Robert Browning. A dramatic monologue is a form of poetry in which the poet employs a narrator—following the meaning of the first word ‘dramatic’ of this term to refer to the presence of an actor/speaker in the poem instead of the poet—to narrate his/her inner thoughts to the reader as if he/she were thinking aloud (Culler, 1975). The events of the past, present, or future through the stream of consciousness technique are presented that help in making understanding of the actions, reactions, and reasons of the speaker to highlight a specific issue of the time. Hence, dramatic monologue, in this respect, brings to the forefront the psychological realism of the characters by dissecting their minds being its major focus. The poet tries to enter into the minds of the speaker to present a view of the world. The personality of the poet does not make any show, then, making the poem objective.

Pakistani English poet Taufiq Rafat (1927-1998) has earned a great reputation as a modern poet to relate his and his people’s real-life events about any topic of common day experience regarding culture, traditions, conventions, war, death, family, friends, professions, religion, politics, and mannerism, etc. (Awan & Ahmed, 2011). “Wedding in the Flood” is his celebrated magnum opus that discloses the psychological realism through the monologues of five characters to highlight the issues of the poor, cultural mindsets of the people, and opportunistic attitudes of the professionals while relating the traditional conventions, geography, and natural disasters of Pakistan. Rafat erases his personality to give voice to the inner thoughts, fears, reasons, and justifications of the character him-herself. The poem is full of mysterious happenings, unexplained connections, unjustifying fears, illogical sayings, and a confused flow of thoughts blending the past, present, and future events.

Roland Barthes in his book S/Z (1974), proposes a model of five codes inherent to every narrative to decode the mysteries at work in the text. The five codes include hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, symbolic, and cultural codes. These codes work in collaboration to come up with the solutions to the enigmas, confusions, illogical connections, and uncertain happenings found on the surface level of the text. These codes become a mode of interpretation of the text in every respect to explain the theme, plot, characterization, and cultural beliefs blended in the narrative. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the mysteries of “Wedding in the Flood” using the Barthesian model of five codes making the reader a part of the interpretive activity.

2. Literature Review

The Barthesian codes have been applied by many a scholar to demystify cultural texts making the reader a part of the creative process. Bina Shah’s The Optimist dissects Barthesian structure at work having enigmas, suspense, connotations, binary symbols, and cultural references to develop
the theme of cultural conflict between Pakistani-British girl Raheela and Pakistani Adnan. The story introduces many puzzling questions about the validity of the title and the action creates situations full of suspense as to why does Raheela marry Adnan if she wants to leave him etc. The story is structured on binary opposition in the characterization and approach of patriarchal Adnan and feminized Raheela. Moreover, the cultural code is seen in references to Pakistani and western elements (Malik et al., 2014). Again, the Barthesian analysis of Shahraz’s A Pair of Jeans comprises a series of actions and reactions arising questions and suspense leading towards their solution in the reader’s mind to develop the plot of break of engagement of a culturally hybrid heroine Mariam. Mariam’s western clothing connotes her freedom of thought as well as her immodest and rebellious attitude towards traditional culture and values. The polarities in her first and second persona, i.e., in jeans and short vest and in shalwar kameez respectively, before her future in-laws, create the conflict in the story. Moreover, two cultural codes develop the theme of cultural conflict leading to the break of Mariam’s engagement (Zaib & Mashori, 2014). In contrast, Qaisra Shahraz’s The Escape revolves around the mysterious elements regarding the alienation of the character Sami, a Pakistani-British senior citizen, who gets comfortable neither in Britain nor in Pakistan. Rather, he gets peace of heart when he joins an old house crowded with people like him. The Barthesian codes help understand the theme, characterization, and plot of the story with a specific focus on the resolution of cultural enigmas (Zaib & Mashori, 2021).

3. Theoretical Framework

The French structuralist Roland Barthes (1915-1980) eyes a piece of literature, for its meaning, not in isolation but as a part of a greater structure (Berry, 2002). Its meaning is embedded not in the text, rather outside the text, i.e., in literary and cultural context. Barthes asserts that every text is based upon five inter-related codes (Barthes, 1981) as an archetypical narrative structure that informs the fragments of the text into a rich fabric (Barthes, 1974). Barthes’ analysis does not take into account the autobiography and philosophy of the writer since Barthes labels this practice as the interpretation of the meaning from the writer’s monopolistic point of view. Nonetheless, he presents the iconoclasm of this traditional approach in favour of the assertion that the reader comes to interpret the text on the basis of multiple signifiers for a single signified (Barthes, 1974). Barthes’ five codes, in this regard, help the reader decode the text. These five inter-related codes are described briefly as follows.

i. Hermeneutic code

The hermeneutic code is also called enigmatic code because it raises questions about the text, such as what the title is about? Why did this happen? And so on, (Scholes & Scholes, 1974) to make the reader active in the process of reading for understanding. The questions are the result of unexplained happenings in the narrative. These mysterious situations arise the curiosity of the reader to unveil the mysteries and puzzles of the text.

ii. Proairetic code
The proairetic code is also known as the code of action (Hawkes, 2003) or narrative code (Eagleton, 1996). Since, this code takes into account the plot of the narrative, the elements of the plot, i.e., exposition, complication, conflict, falling action, and resolution, to unveil the series of actions and reactions step-by-step. Every element takes the action a step further increasing the suspense—the tension of what is going to happen next—and predictions in the story on the part of the reader. The elements that create tension or suspense in the narrative poke questions in the reader’s mind and make him anticipate the probable outcome of certain situations. The reader becomes a part of the text in solving the tension by anticipation.

iii. Cultural Code

The cultural code is termed as the referential code (Barthes, 1974). It helps the reader understand the meaning of the text based on shared context, since, things do not give meaning in isolation. The meaning of one thing is determined by its difference from the other depending on the lack between both of them (Berry, 2002). The reader gets to know the author’s intention due to a shared cultural experience and a common knowledge of the world (Hawkes, 2003). The elements showing the cultural knowledge include myths, clichés, proverbs (Felluga, 2011), etc.

iv. Semantic code

The semantic code is famous as the code of themes (Berry, 2002). It refers to those literary features of the text that give connotative or suggestive meaning in the activity of text comprehension. The hints to the theme a text contain in the form of characterization, setting, and places in the development of the theme. Every narrative has connotative characters, places, and objects that help in the meaning-making process of the text (Eagleton, 1996).

v. Symbolic code

The symbolic code is called the antithetic code (Barthes, 1974). It also helps in the determination of the theme of the narrative, like semantic code, but on a wider scale as it goes beyond the dimensions of the semantic code. It refers to the contrary elements, polarity or binary opposition, in the text for its meaning. Binaries help understand reality based on the difference between two entities. The meaning of one entity is understood in connection with that of the other entity that involves the features the first one lacks. The lack constructs the meaning. Similarly, the themes are reflected through differences in literary elements to point out the conflict created through this lack (Berry, 2002).

4. Methodology

This textual analysis process uses the step-by-step method devised by Barthes in his book S/Z in the application of five codes on Taufiq Rafat’s poem “Wedding in the Flood” in his anthology Arrival of the Monsoon: Collected Poems (1947-1978) from beginning to the end exploring
enigmas, puzzles, and confusions present in the psychological monologues of the narrators. The answers to these enigmas are sought out through cultural, semantic, and symbolic references.

5. Discussion

The setting of “Wedding in the Flood”, a narrative poem, is a traditional rural wedding ceremony in Pakistan taking place in the season of Monsoon. The narrative contains five stanzas of seventeen free verses each to record the impressions of five different narrators on the occasion of a wedding. It is divided into five monologues, following the order of arrangement, those of the:

a. Bride’s Mother
b. Bridegroom
c. Bride
d. Bridegroom’s Father
e. Ferryman

The paper attempts to explore the poem from Barthesian “Codes of Interpretation”.

5.1. Hermeneutic code

Hermeneutic code creates interest of the reader in the interpretation of the narrative by raising questions in his/her mind about unexplained happenings and sets the stage for enigmas and suspense (Scholes & Scholes, 1974). The poem captures the reader’s attention by placing him out of the comfort zone and holds him/her by the title first. The title of the poem “Wedding in the Flood” compels the reader to ask questions about its nature. Since it is a ‘wedding’, it must engage a celebratory tone having related the carefree, merry-making, and felicitous activities of joy and happiness. Hence, the narrative may be belonging to the literary tradition of comedy ¹. But what does the adverbial phrase ‘in the flood’ imply? A flood, a natural disaster, brings tragedy ² to man in its wake. What type of wedding does take place in the flood? Is it paradoxical ³? Does it refer to some sinister fate in store for the characters? Or does the title have some symbolic reference to the flood to relate the emotional turmoil of the related characters at the crucial hour of the wedding? Does the flood connote the positive implication of the emotional expansiveness of the bride and groom? Or does it bear some negative implication brought up by the enemies of the bride and groom? Is it a comedy? Is it a tragedy? Or is it a tragic-comedy ⁴? Such a bundle of questions storms the reader’s brain by thinking about the title.

Moving onto the first stanza, the monologue of the bride’s mother, the reader is again occupied by many perplexing questions regarding the mother’s queries. Why is the mother of the bride so sad and confused when she is expected to be finally satisfied at her daughter’s wedding?
Why does she say, “They are taking my girl away forever” (Rafat, 1985, p. 134)? Will the bride never visit her parental home after marriage? Does the use of the pronoun ‘they’ refer to the strangeness attached to the bride’s in-laws? If they are so untrustable, why is the mother marrying her daughter in their house? Why does the mother qualify the house of the bride’s in-laws as cold? If she has found them emotionless, why is she developing relationships with them? If the bride is too immature to adjust to a new house yet, why is she being married so early? And why is the merry-making music of clarinet is reduced to a whine? The doubts of the bride’s mother get the reader to prepare for some disastrous outcome.

The second stanza engages the reader into comprehending the psychological state of the bridegroom on his wedding day by raising many a question. Does his monologue refer to that he is greedy? Has he not seen the bride before marriage? Why does he become so impatient to catch her glimpse now while she is inside the covered palankeen when he has waited till now? Why does he not believe that her hand can match her face? Will he only treat her nicely if she is beautiful? What if she is not as beautiful as to come up to his expectations? Will he abuse her then? Will he leave her then? Why is he not satisfied with the dowry which is given to her? Why does he think of his bride as a girl who never forgets licking pots? Why is pot-licking only concerned with girls? The inner doubts of the bridegroom present a direct contrast to his appearance as a good son-in-law.

The third stanza opens Pandora’s box of the insecurities being felt by the bride herself on her journey to start a new life. Why is the palankeen for the bride uncomfortably built? Why the palankeen is covered? Why is it dark from the inside? Why its roof is leaking? Why is she feeling so cold even in the heavy attire of a wedding in summer? Why her body is getting cold? Why is the bride not taken proper care of? Why is she so scared when is expected to be very excited since a girl’s life is expected to be secured after marriage? Of whom the bride is afraid on her big day? Is it only the rain the bride is afraid of? Why is she trying to peep through the curtains to see the wedding party? Has she not seen her husband before? Has she not known the nature of her husband? Why is she worried about the destruction of the dowry at the hands of the rain? Will she be treated well if the safe arrival of the dowry is guaranteed? These impressions present a paradox to the superficial shyness and happiness of the bride on her wedding day.

The fourth stanza, the monologue of the bridegroom’s father, raises the question about the mentality of the parents of a boy behind his marriage. Is the motif of the father behind his son’s marriage getting dowry only? How much dowry do they want? What type of dowry do they want? Why does the father want bullock in dowry? Is the dowry expected to serve the family than the bride? Is the presence of the bride in their home nothing? Is the dowry more important than the bride? Do they not know before marriage whether the bride’s family will be able to give them such an expensive dowry? What will be the fate of the bride now since she has not brought the expected dowry? Why is the bridegroom’s father angry now? Why are they continuing their journey when he knows the incoming danger of flood in the river they are going to cross? Why did they get late
when the ferryman had already warned them that he would leave otherwise? Do all these expositions set the stage for the validity of the doubts of the bride and her mother the bride is going to face?

The fifth and last stanza opens up the greedy nature of the ferryman who still awaits the wedding party when it is late more than two hours. Why does he wait for them after his warning of leaving the place in case of being late? Is he the only ferryman the wedding party will get? Will he charge extra charges now from the wedding party? Is the money more important than the life of a ferryman and others? Why does he not aware them of the coming danger of flood in the river? Why do they get aboard to cross the stormy river? Why the river is so angry? Does it personify the anger of God at this treatment of a poor family? Why does the repeated mention of dowry surround the poem? All these questions bewilder the reader for so many unexplained mysteries awakened by these monologues.

5.2. Proairetic Code

The proairetic code moves around the action (Hawkes, 2003), reaction, tension, and suspense at play in the narrative carried through the five elements of plot – exposition, complication, climax, falling action, and resolution (Eagleton, 1996). These elements capture the reader’s attention and prepare the stage for confusion, enigmas, and suspense in the story. The reader starts anticipating what will happen next becoming the part of creative activity.

5.2.1. Exposition

The exposition – background information – takes place in “Wedding in the Flood” at two levels. i.e., the exposure of the nature of the characters and that of the previous action of the narrative. The inner psychological states of the five narrators at the time of the wedding are dissected in their respective monologues composed in five stanzas. At first, we are given a window to the internal mindset of the bride’s mother, belonging to a poor family, on her daughter’s wedding day. Her monologue manifests her as a confused character since her feelings present a mixture of satisfaction, sadness, heart-brokenness, confusion, anger, and uncertainty at the same time (Ahmad et al., 2013). Secondly, the greedy nature of the bridegroom is dissected in the second stanza. His voracity for dowry, beauty, and submissiveness on the part of the bride would guarantee the bride’s best sojourn in his house as a wife. Lowly dowry and rain make the bridegroom give disapproval of the bride. Thirdly, the bride is exposed as shy, fearful, uninformed, confused, afraid, and full of curiosity about her coming fate. Fourthly, the bridegroom’s father, a farmer, is disclosed as a predator, avaricious, and mercenary, who has married his son only to receive a huge dowry,
especially the professional wealth like a pair of oxen. Now, since the bride has failed to materialize their dreams, her father-in-law shows a complaining tone at every incident. Lastly, the opportunistic and materialistic nature of the ferryman is exposed at the time of need. He is thinking to charge extra money for his services in the wake of heavy rain. Hence, everyone is shown as selfish thinking about his/her benefits only. Owing to these instinctual characteristics of the narrators, the reader starts imagining the probable outcomes of their actions.

The second exposition is the exposition of the action at play in the narrative. The main action is the introduction of a conflict in every narrative. The rest of the story comprises a journey towards the conflict and resolution of the conflict. Exposition fills the information about the initial situation which will be the first nail in the journey toward the conflict. The conflict in the present story is the uncertainty of the safe arrival of the wedding party. The execution informs the reader about the wedding day that has been a prolonged, difficult, and challenging one for the parents of the bride. They have to take good care of all the guests present at the wedding party. The drizzling and rain now and then have struggled hard to make the situation worse. However, at the time of the meal, perhaps God pities them and stops the rain. The function goes well and the bride is departed finally. Two men carry the dowry of a tin-trunk, looking-glass, and a cot and four men carry the covered palankeen in which the bride is made to sit. And the wedding procession departs for the bridegroom’s house across the river. The reader starts predicting probable positive and negative reactions to these actions.

5.2.2. Complication
The series of events that prepare the way for the conflict of the story is called complication. The conflict in the narrative is to cross the stormy river safe and sound. On the way, the bridegroom, bride, and bridegroom’s father show a deep concern for their safe departure. Everyone wishes that the wedding party will be able to cross the river safely. Everyone trusts the ferryman in this regard. Correspondingly, the ferryman expedites the action to face the conflict. No sooner does the march of the wedding party ends on the bank of the river, than the ferryman orders everyone to aboard the boat quickly along with the dowry. So that they may be able to cross the swelling river before it gets flooded. All these events and reflections create suspense in the reader who starts predicting some evil outcome in store for the characters at such hasty action.

5.2.3. Climax
Climax marks the turning point in the fate of the characters. The rain gets heavier creating a storm in the river. The storm advances the river to get flooded. This incident arises the curiosity of the reader even more. The reader starts wondering about the fate of the boat in the river.

5.2.4. Falling Action
The falling action is the direct outcome of the climax. The looming unwanted happens eventually. The boat is caught up by the flood. The movements of the boats become wayward and unruly. The
whole crew starts screaming loudly. The boat emits everyone out into the monstrous river. The poem reads: “Oh what a consummation is here…” (Rafat, 1985, p. 136). The treatment of the boat by the flood proves the reader’s anticipation about some tragic happening true.

5.2.5. Resolution

The resolution resolves the conflict. The bridegroom’s father tosses on the waves which are as dangerous as the horns of beasts. The bridegroom, out of costume, gasps heavily on the tumultuous rise and fall of the waves. His garlands spread around him. The bride lays in the bed downstream among the willows. Hence, the end of the poem verifies the reader’s fear of the tragic ending of the narrative.

5.3. Cultural Code

Many mysteries present in the text are resolved through cultural code. This code refers to the wise knowledge (Barthes, 1974) derived from the experience which is agreed upon by the common people in a specific culture. It is disseminated in the culture through generations. It may take the form of proverbs, cultural idioms, myths, and clichés (Felluga, 2011). “Wedding in the Flood” is full of cultural references. It portrays the conventions of a traditional wedding ceremony in the rural areas of Pakistan.

The rural areas of Pakistan are generally agrarian resided by the generations of farmers. They aim to fix marriages usually after cultivation since they earn ample of money in their professional season. Following traditional conventions, they usually have arranged marriages. Arranged marriages secure a significant place in traditional Pakistani patriarchy – a system of family where the male head of the family exercises authority and power over the whole lineage, especially he dominates, suppresses, and discriminates against women (Facio, 2013). Traditionally, the decision of marriage was taken completely by the parents ignoring the choice of their sons/daughters in Pakistan. The girls were made to marry at a very early age. It was not allowed for the girl and boy to see or meet one another before marriage. Marriage, in this sense, came as a complete surprise full of curiosities to the bride and bridegroom.

In Pakistani patriarchal culture, it was believed, a few decades ago, that the life of a girl before marriage is full of challenges, difficulties, and miseries at her parent’s house. The security and safety of a man as a husband marks a historic epoch in her life toward prosperity, dignity, and respect (Carter, 2006). Owing to this conception, the house of the husband was deemed the final destination of a girl where she had to stay and serve for the rest of her life. It was considered a culturally accepted and respectable code of life for a woman. Divorce was inferred as a shame to the bride’s family. A famous proverb was used to be transferred to every bride at the time of her departure in this regard that her palankee is raised from her parent’s house and her funeral will raise from her husband’s house. Using this conception, the bride was taken in a covered palankee which was carried on the shoulders of four men.
Dowry is a marital gift given to the bride at the time of her wedding. It may take any form of wealth – property, gold, land, money – that may help the new couple to turn the leaf of its new life easily (Singh, 2013). From the very start, it was used to have included the basic necessities of life including articles used for three basic needs like sleeping, carrying valuable clothes, and watching one’s reflection owing to the basic function of marriage. With the passage of time, the need for necessities was converted into luxuries to reach its present standard. The mainstream articles include three major things, i.e., bed, almirah, and dresser owing to serve the basic purpose of marriage – sleeping and youthful beauty. But this cultural practice took a commercial shape to materialize the maximum material desires on the part of the bridegroom’s family. The greed of the receiving family, concerning this practice, makes it expect that the bride will also bring with her the economical resources to support her in-laws. In rural areas, the animal-rearing families expect their daughters-in-law to bring with them animals so that they may enhance their business. Similarly, the farmer families used to expect their daughters-in-law to bring oxen along with their dowry so that they may use them in plowing.

After dowry, the beauty and complexion of the bride secure the next position. Pakistani patriarchy is taught even in childhood the merit of good looks in fair skin. No matter the features and complexion of the bridegroom, the bride must be fair and beautiful in each and every respect. The fair hands of the bride are decorated with beautiful patterns of henna. The darker the henna leaves the color, the deeper is her in-laws’ love for her. The third cultural thing of a happy post-marital survival in Pakistan is the selfless servitude of the bride. The bride must obey the orders of her mother-in-law. Otherwise, there arise clashes leading to separation.

Monsoon season is a specialty of Pakistan. It follows the scorching summer. At first, the heat of summer is abated and the weather becomes enjoyable. But the continuous rains cause floods leading to many disastrous situations. In agrarian areas, the marriages are fixed in the pleasant season of Monsoon. If it rains during the marriage ceremony, cultural jokes are cracked upon the brides that rain is the result of their habit of licking pots after having meals. However, these cultural jokes take the shape of drawing a grudge against brides. If the in-laws are not happy with the bride, they crack, in a negative sense, this cultural joke to show a satirical comment as observed in the poem. Similarly, the bridegroom uses the word ‘wench’ for the bride, which means a youthful beauty but, in its extreme form, it is used to refer to a slut, a cultural abuse. In this sense, the bridegroom, in an angry mood for not receiving a costly dowry, calls the bride a pot-licking wench to add insult to her character.

Last but not the least, the opportunistic nature of every recipient becomes a cultural label. In a time of crisis, everyone is desirous to get his ten percent from the miserable situation of the victims. The bridegroom’s family tries to use the pretext of dowry to get professional wealth from the poor bride’s parents who had taken debts to afford the good reception and refreshment of the wedding party as well as the dowry. The financial pressure for the good meal, arrangements for the sitting of the party, and above all the dowry would probably have made them borrowers for
decades. Similarly, the ferryman tries to get ten percent from the wedding party since the weather is getting worst making their voyage risky. Instead of helping them in this disastrous hour, he tries to manipulate them into extra payment.

5.4. Semantic Code

The semantic code encompasses the connotative meaning of the elements of the narrative that suggest its theme (Berry, 2002). The characters, setting, places and other elements of the poem conspire to develop its theme (Eagleton, 1996). The major theme of “Wedding in the Flood” is the post-marital happy survival of a Pakistani bride, which depends upon three wheels: an expensive dowry, the outer beauty of the girl, and the submissive servitude of the girl. This theme is connotated explicitly and implicitly throughout the poem. The worried narratives of all the narrators about the safe departure of the wedding party connote the aforementioned theme explicitly. The inner reflections of the bridegroom provide links to this concern. He wants his wife to bring a large dowry with her as a token of her survival after marriage. He is unhappy for the dowry she has brought with her is very cheap and in a lesser amount. He draws his grudge by complaining that his wife is voracious enough to lick the pots as he calls her a “pot-licking wench” (Rafat, 1985, p. 134). However, in spite of these limitations, he still saves a soft corner in his heart for her if she fulfills the remaining two criteria. He would be happy with her if she is beautiful physically and submissive in the servitude of his family. This instinctual psychology of the bridegroom is given air through his action as the bridegroom glimpses the bride’s hands gripping the sides of palankeen and likes her fare and slim fingers when the wedding party is on its march towards the river. He goes on to wish that her face may also testify the beauty of her hands. In addition, he wants her bride to be submissive before his family. If she serves his mother and does not violate the rules of his household, he will compromise with such lowly dowry.

However, the bride fails in securing the same soft corner in the heart of the bridegroom’s father for her. Since he is more mature than his son, he only bothers about the materialistic perspective of this marriage. He suggests his open disapproval of the received dowry. He complains that they have not even given their daughter “a bullock at least” (Rafat, 1985, p. 135). Whatever is given, will only be used by their daughter only. The complaining gets worst when he makes the girl responsible for the heavy rain and asserts: “The silly girl’s been licking too many pots” (Rafat, 1985, p. 135). Similarly, the same fears have been shared by the bride. She is worried about the dowry which can be destroyed by the rain. The thought of the destruction of dowry terrifies her as she gets imagining how will she survive happily in that stranger family after her marriage. She is uncertain about the nature of her husband also.

Analogously, the structural elements of the narrative connote the same theme implicitly. The fears of the bride are portrayed through her setting where the palankeen is a metaphor for her in-laws’ house. It is nothing more than a cage for the bride though beautifully decorated from the outside, as people see it. The cage is dark connoting the uninformed state of the bride’s mind regarding the nature of her in-laws. The curtains of the palankeen hinder her natural identification
with her outer surroundings of strange in-laws. The roof of the palankeen is leaking and its floor is wet making her body cold. The bride is feeling insecure and terrified. It connotes the uncertain fear of free and independent living. The verse “I’m cold and scared” (Rafat, 1985, p. 135) suggests her degenerating fate. Moreover, the shouldering of palankeen by four men may refer to an end to the bride’s life. These pathetic reflections and descriptions of the bride connote the disastrous outcome of her marriage.

Homogenously, the ending narrative also connotes the fulfillment of the fears of the bride. The rain leading to the flood in the river suggests the mental, physical, and emotional manipulation of the bride at the hands of her marriage on her nocturnal night. The expressions “the coy bride is truly bedded” (Rafat, 1985, p. 136) “the bridegroom heaved on the heaving tide” (Rafat, 1985, p. 136), “the ferry/saws this way and that, and then disgorges / its screaming load” (Rafat, 1985, p. 136), “The clarinet fills with water” (Rafat, 1985, p. 136), and “Oh what a consummation is here” (Rafat, 1985, p. 136) are suggestive of these post-marital activities. Closely, the swollen river is a metaphor for the traditional responsibilities of a newly-wed bride. She is ground under the burden of these cultural norms that suppress her personal freedom and a right to live fully reducing her to a domestic slave vulnerable to mental and physical abuse for the rest of her life.

5.5. Symbolic Code

The Symbolic code puts its focus on the binary opposites, present in the narrative, which helps in developing its theme (Berry, 2002). Three binary opposites, in this regard, are found to be on work in this poem to relate three different themes, i. e., the theme of dowry, professional selfishness, and expectation versus reality. The primary theme revolves around the dowry in the marriage. Two mindsets about dowry are disclosed in the poem. The bride’s family has given her a cot, a tin trunk, and a looking glass. In opposition to it, the bridegroom’s father insists on a pair of oxen. The binary opposition found in this regard works at the conceptual levels of both parties. The bride’s family has bestowed her with basic household necessities. They have given her a cot to sleep, a trunk to save her clothes, and a looking glass to present herself in the best way she can. All these necessities belong to the bride as only she will use them, serving the basic purpose of dowry-gifting. However, the binary opposition to this dowry is the pair of oxen as related by the bridegroom’s father. He wants the bride to bring that dowry which will be used by her in-laws instead of the bride. This communication gap between the mental levels of both parties leads to unsuccessful marriage.

The difference in the thinking patterns of both parties also adds to the main conflict of the aforementioned theme. The bride’s family thinks that they have served the bridegroom’s family with delicious food and good reception rituals. They have given the best dowry that will make the in-laws happy as the bride will have her own furniture to meet her basic necessities to start a new life. And the bridegroom’s family will not have to provide her with it. On the contrary, the bridegroom’s family is not interested in this dowry since they think it is lowly and unprofitable. This dowry will serve their daughter only. They were happier if it would have been a professional
dowry to add to their professional wealth. This contradiction in the mental approaches of both families denies the happy survival of the bride after marriage.

The secondary theme of professional selfishness surfaces itself in the contradiction present between the statement and action of the ferryman. He demands the marriage party to come back before three pm if it wants to continue its journey back to the bridegroom’s house through the river. Otherwise, the ferryman will leave and they will stick on the way to their house because no other ferryman is there to serve them. This statement the ferryman blurts out predicting the coming danger of flood looming over their heads due to continuous rain. However, the wedding party reaches the bank of the river two hours late. And fulfilling its expectations, it finds the ferryman awaiting it. this contradiction between the words and actions of the ferryman opens up the professional opportunistic attitude at the time of crisis. The ferryman puts himself and others in danger only to earn the extra payments to meet the demand of the hour.

A binary opposition pulsating in the narrative is between the noise of clarinet and screaming load to relate another secondary theme of expectation versus reality of a wedding. The two opposite noises present the ironic situation of the wedding. The music of the clarinet diffuses a celebratory note on the occasion of the wedding predicting a happy ending. But the screaming load in the boat represents the actual fate the wedding party has in store for it. The wedding party is caught up in the flood in the river to meet its awaiting fate.

6. Findings

The hermeneutic code raises a storm of curiosities in the mind of the reader related to the genre, title, plot, and themes of the poem. The remaining four codes help in the demystification of these queries. Many mysteries the reader finds at the start are resolved in the proairetic code. The reader finds out that the poem is a tragedy. The doubts and fears of the bride and those of the bride’s mother are fulfilled to have an uncertain happening. The whine of the clarinet at the start of the poem is found to have foreshadowed the tragic ending of the celebratory occasion of the wedding.

The cultural code resolves the referential riddles present in the narrative. The reader finds out that the reasons for the worry of the bride and the bride’s mother are about the bride’s post-marital happy survival. Putting aside the pang of separation from her daughter in her heart, the mother reflects that her daughter is being taken away forever by the strangers, a necessary evil of arranged marriage. Her daughter is too innocent and shy to deal with the shrewd world since she is being married at a very early age. It will be a challenge for her to leave her previous lifestyle and accustom to a newer one – a more demanding phase – to please the whole family by her servitude. The bride has neither seen her bridegroom nor knows his family affairs. Thinking about her future in a new house, she gets very afraid in the palanquin. The curiosities of the bride and the bridegroom about each other seem to be the result of arranged marriage, again. The complaining attitude of the bridegroom and his father is found to have been rooted in receiving cheap dowry. The bridegroom’s father wants a couple of oxen in dowry so that he may use them
in his business. The title of pot-licking wench earned by the bride is the grudge of her in-laws against her. It’s a cultural practice to use this idiom for the bride when there is rain on the wedding day. The waiting of the ferryman for the wedding party in such dangerous weather is exposed as to charge extra money getting the advantage of their shortcomings.

The semantic code helps the reader resolve many mysterious riddles about the repeated mention of dowry which have been focused on at the start of the poem. The reader gets the answers to the questions about the bride and bride’s mother’s fears regarding the safe arrival of the dowry in such drastic weather as well as the insistence of the bridegroom and his father on giving the particulars of the dowry as “a cot, a tin trunk, and a looking-glass” (Rafat, 1985, p. 135) in a complaining tone. The issue of an expensive dowry comes up as the supporting pillar in the edifice of the marriage in this regard. Similarly, the theme of dowry is approached through binary opposition in the symbolic code. Moreover, professional selfishness throws light on the opportunistic ideals of professionals. Above all, the irony of the situation is found in the difference between the expectations and the reality of the marriage.

7. Conclusion

To conclude the discussion, we can say that Taufiq Rafat’s narrative “Wedding in the Flood” pertains to a mysterious design that is disclosed through inter-related five narrative codes, given by Roland Barthes, enclosed in every narrative to resolve its hidden mysteries. Firstly, the hermeneutic code captures the attention of the reader by storming his mind with questions about the title, genre, and general storyline of the poem. The remaining four codes help interpret the text by answering all these queries the reader faces at the start. Secondly, the proairetic code relates the series of actions through five elements of plot – exposition, complication, climax, falling action, and resolution – while increasing suspense and enigmas, and predictions about the progressing plot. The exposition gives background information about the characters and the plot. The characterization consists of the greedy, materialistic, unsatisfied, and complaining bridegroom and his father, the confused and worried bride and her mother, and an opportunistic ferryman. The main conflict – the safe arrival of the wedding party through the crossing of the river – reaches its climax when their boat is hit by the flood and every character meets his/her fatal fate in the resolution making it a tragedy. Thirdly, the cultural code explains cultural aspects of “Wedding in the Flood”. Pakistani patriarchal culture in villages fixes arranged marriages of the girls at a very early age. The in-laws of the bride expect to receive dowry that can help them flourish in their occupation. Moreover, the bride should be fair, beautiful, and submissive. The rain in the marriage marks the bride as the pot-licker. Henna is used to portray different designs on brides’ hands. The brides are departed to the bridegroom’s house sitting inside the palanquin. The house of the bride’s husband is considered to be her final abode. Fourthly, employing the literary elements of the narrative, the semantic code helps in the dissemination of the major theme, i.e., the happy post-marital survival of the bride which depends on the expensive and professional dowry and beauty as well as the submissiveness of the bride. The iconoclasm of these expectations foreshadows the
fatal fate of the bride in store explicitly through the complaining narratives of the bridegroom and his father about the disapproval of the received dowry and implicitly through the miserable condition of the bride caged in a cold and dark palankeen being carried away on four shoulders, a reference to funeral also. Fifthly, the symbolic code presents three different themes through binary opposites of the story – the theme of dowry, professional selfishness, and expectation versus reality. “A cot, a tin trunk, and a looking-glass” share a binary opposition with the “pair of oxen” to show the difference in the mindsets between the brides’ family and the bridegroom’s family diffusing the theme of dowry. The bride’s family has given the dowry which will be used by the bride while the bridegroom’s family wants a dowry, a pair of oxen, which will be used by them, and not the bride. The contradiction between the words and actions of the ferryman to get extra payment reflects the secondary theme of professional opportunistic selfishness of the professionals. Whereas, the music of the clarinet and the screams in the flood show another secondary theme of expectation versus reality as the wedding is supposed to have a happy ending and it actually ends in a sad ending. Hence, the reader interprets all the mysteries present in Rafat’s “Wedding in the Flood” through the use of the Barthesian five codes.

References


